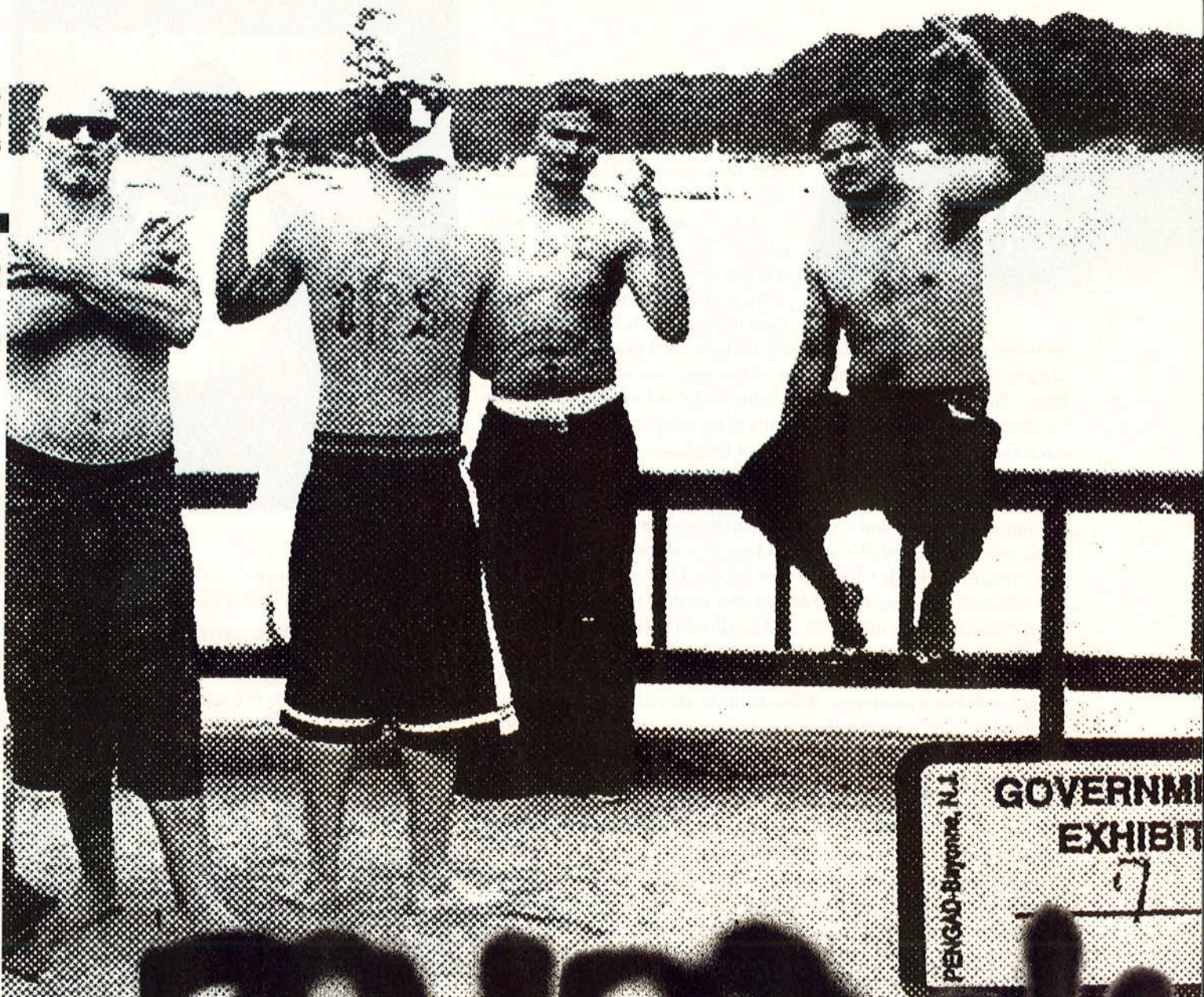




THE BIG

**AUTHORITIES HAVE WEAKENED THE BROWNSIDE LOCOS,
THANKS TO INFORMATION PASSED ON THROUGH**



Payback

**A GANG THAT HAS TERRORIZED GWINNETT COUNTY,
ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS. BY W. PATE McMICHAEL**

**MAY 23,
1998**

IT WAS ALREADY LATE BY THE TIME Ricardo Meza left work at Barnacles, the sports bar near Gwinnett Place Mall. But it was Saturday night, and the 19-year-old had plenty of energy, and regardless of the hour, 11 p.m., he wanted to see his girlfriend, Brenda. She'd told him she had a secret to share.

Ricardo drove to his Norcross apartment to wash up. He lived with his two brothers and his sister—a close family. He took out a nice blue shirt, some Menace jeans he paid too much for, and a clean pair of green-and-black Nikes. The shirt covered most of his tattoos—he had MEZA inked across his light-skinned shoulders and a crucifix at the center of his chest. LOVED ran across his stomach, and the Virgin of Guadalupe with the inscription “Cuida mi Vida”—care for my life—decorated his right shoulder. All that showed was the spider web inked on his left elbow. He put double-loop earrings in his left ear and a single hoop in his right and stuffed some pay stubs, two beepers, and \$91 in his pockets, then slid into the badass, two-door, blood-red Honda Civic everyone envied. The car had been lowered and outfitted with wide chrome wheels and window tint. A Mexican flag license plate faced the open road. Old English lettering on the windshield read “La Ley.” The law.

Brenda, 17, was staying at the Motel 6 because the power had been cut off at her family's apartment. When Ricardo arrived, he found the family—mother, aunt, uncle, brothers, sisters, cousins—crowded in two rooms with the doors open to let in the cool spring air. Ricardo started horsing around with the little ones right away—he loved children. Brenda's mother, Lucy, took note of that. The boy had a good heart. He worked so hard. He believed in God. He didn't mess with the gangs, although he could pass for a banger with his tattoos, earrings, and goatee.

Lucy had been there the day, three months ago, that Ricardo and Brenda met at the car wash. He was primping the Civic, and Brenda's family was washing her aunt's car. Brenda couldn't take her eyes off Ricardo—or his ride. They chatted and exchanged beeper numbers.

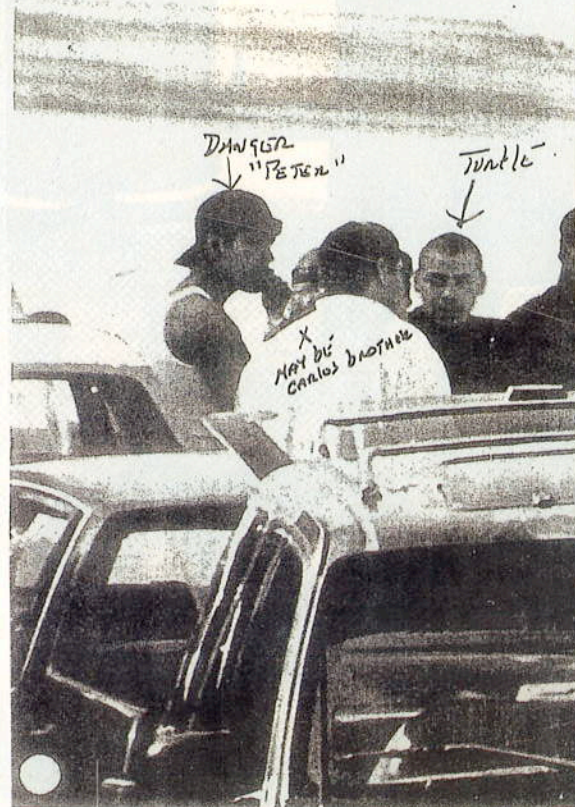
Soon Ricardo started visiting their apartment. He took Brenda's little brothers out to eat. He would even help bathe the wormy little devils. Tonight Brenda's mother needed another favor from Ricardo. Would he please take her nephew Joseph home? It was just a few miles away, on Winters Chapel Road.

Ricardo looked like he wanted to say no, but he didn't. Brenda, Joseph, and Brenda's sister's boyfriend, Frog—who claimed to have recently left the gang SUR-13, known by their blue bandanas—hopped into the Civic.

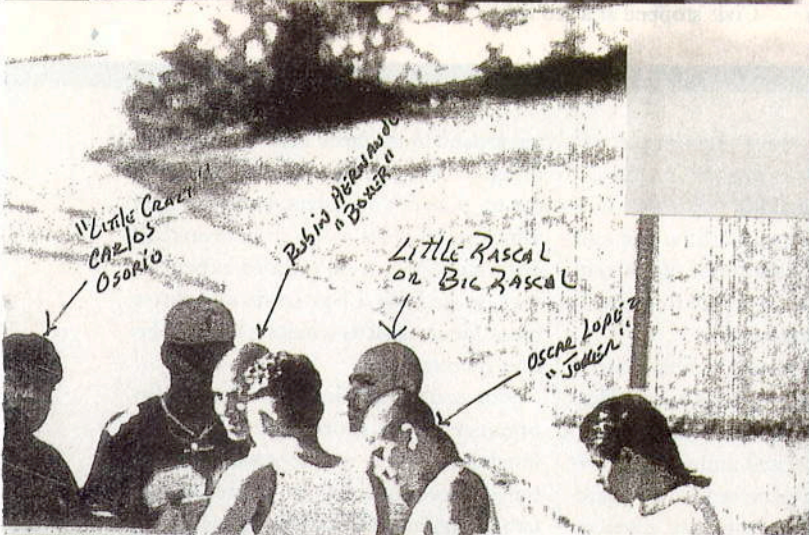
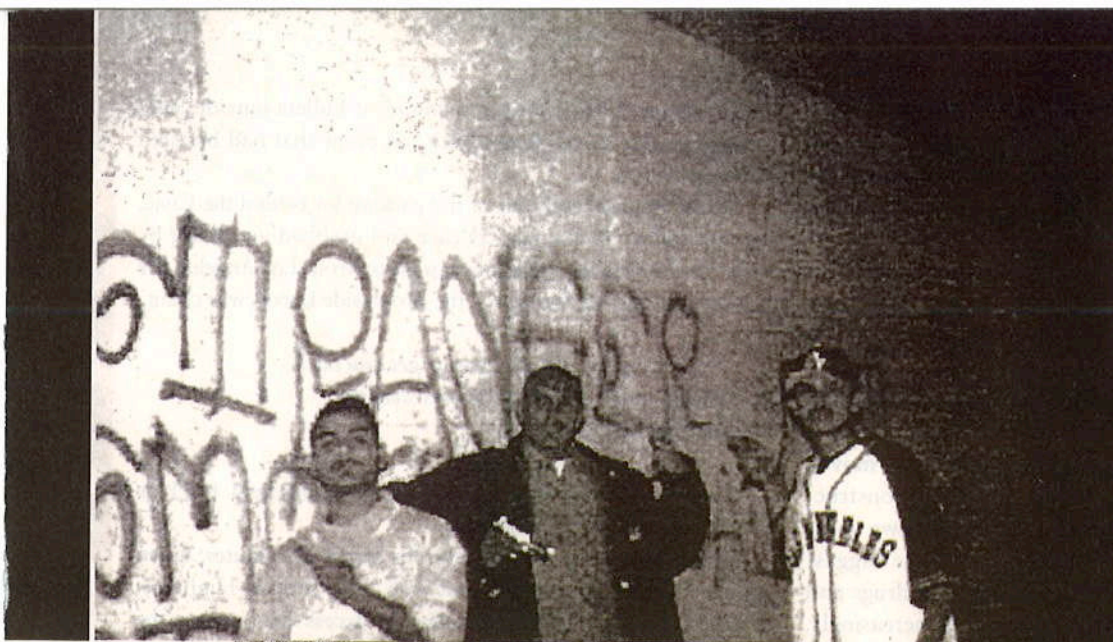
“We'll be right back,” Ricardo said.

AT THE WAFFLE HOUSE DOWN FROM THE MOTEL 6, Joker looked through the dark tint of a 1966 Chevrolet Impala. He wore a khaki bandana around his neck. He was high and drunk. Two of his fellow Brownside Locos gang members, Boxer and Turtle, had gone inside to purchase cigarettes from the vending machine, leaving him with the driver. None of the four had turned 18.

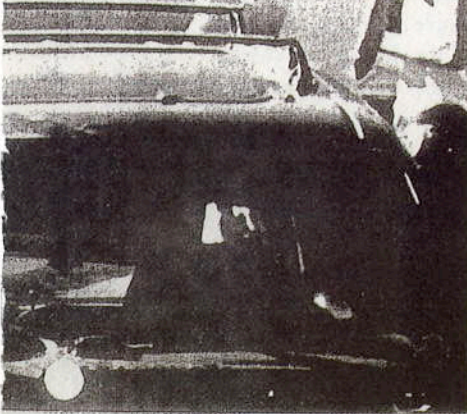
Ricardo Meza's red Civic pulled in a few spaces away, near the pay phone. Joker had seen the car before. Members of the gang had even hurled a beer bottle at it and thrown threatening gang signs Ricardo's



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H.K. HGR



SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY Investigators were able to connect the dots in the Brownside Locos case thanks in part to keepsakes and photos stashed by Oscar "Joker" Lopez, including shots of group gatherings, sketches of tattoos, and, top left, a photo of Joker with what would be identified as a murder weapon. (Images: Case Files)



I've been
I saw
could crawl
bleemished
's horrendous
?



A Gangster Prayer

now I lay me down to sleep,
Protect me God from those who creep
with evil plots & wicked schemes
To snatch me from my restful dreams
I knew there's bad things I have done
That's why I'm sleeping with my gun
and if I should be startled from my peace
my gun will roar like blasts of thunder
got to fight to live just one more day
so many things to do so many words to
But if it's my time to go & my life's to end
just leave me in my dreams never to
my whole life's a constant struggle
from the crack to the

way. He was always over at Forest Vale Apartments visiting Brenda, whom gang members wanted as a homegirl. And now Ricardo Meza had the nerve to hang a blue bandana—the color of rival gang SUR-13—from the rearview mirror of the tricked-out Civic.

Boxer returned with the cigarettes, incredulous at the sight of the blue bandana. “Be quiet, just calm down,” Joker told him. “Don’t act. Don’t get crazy. Just don’t look at ’em. We’re gonna follow ’em. We’re gonna follow these guys.”

To the driver he said, “Hey, follow these guys now. We’re gonna get ’em.”

Joker and Boxer were cousins. Their parents had moved to Atlanta from Fresno before the pre-Olympics construction boom. After dropping out in ninth grade, the two spent their time making the Brownside Locos one the biggest street gangs in Gwinnett County. Brownside sold drugs and committed petty thefts, armed robberies, and, increasingly, drive-by shootings. There was a warrant out for Joker’s

arrest because he’d sprayed a round of bullets outside Selenia’s nightclub a few weeks back, an event that had boosted his confidence.

As the Impala eased out of the parking lot behind the Civic, Joker reached inside his CD case and grabbed an album by The Psycho Realm, a gangster-rap group from Los Angeles. He called up “The Big Payback,” the Brownside Locos’ war chant.

*I’m looking for you, I’m gonna get you back,
When I catch you on the streets sleepin’
And that ass is mine*

Then Joker took out the .45-caliber Springfield 1911 he kept in his waistband at all times.

The Impala followed the Civic for about 10 minutes, down Jimmy Carter Boulevard, past I-85, past Buford Highway, to the Peachtree Industrial Boulevard access road, where the Civic stopped at a red light.

“I JUST KEPT GETTING DEEPER. THINGS STARTED GETTING OUT OF CONTROL.”

How one boy grew up to become a member of the Brownside Locos.

JUANA MAYNARD WORE A NEW SUEDE jacket to her son’s sentencing. Her graying hair was pulled back in a simple but elegant manner, and she wore sterling silver earrings. She sat in the courtroom looking down like someone in prayer—solemn, humble, respectful. Her 56 years showed on her face.

She had arrived early. It was January 5, 2007.

Marshals escorted her son, Carlos Maynard Reyes, into the Richard B. Russell Federal Building and Courthouse. They walked him through the double doors. Carlos looked isolated, 23 stories above the city of Atlanta in the utter silence of Judge Beverly Martin’s imposing court. The chains around Carlos’ ankles clanked as he walked. He wore a long-sleeved white T-shirt and baggy orange scrubs. He

had served almost three years of pretrial imprisonment. Most days he sat for 23 hours in his cell, making paper figurines for his 4-year-old son, Carlitos. He had moved jails twice because of the threats that had been made on his life for cooperating with the government.

As the guard took off the handcuffs, Carlos stole a glimpse of his family. Ten of them had shown, including his wife. They were well dressed and sitting close together, chatting nervously. The guard asked Carlos’ mother, wife, and sisters to please move back a row.

An American flag with gold tassels hung to Judge Martin’s right. The seal of the United States judiciary was branded in the paneling above her head. The court came to order.

JUANA’S HUSBAND ABANDONED THE family soon after Carlos, her sixth child, was born in 1981. She had no way to provide, so she sneaked across the U.S.–Mexico border and made it to Gwinnett County alone, leaving her children with family. Juana worked two jobs and sent the money to her children. Over time, she brought each one to Georgia illegally. In the 20-plus years she has been here, she has not taken a dime in government welfare.

Carlos was the first to arrive. He lived his first few years in Gwinnett like any other child in the suburbs. He loved Nintendo. He loved sports. He loved splash-

ing around in the creek below their home, bringing home tadpoles, crawfish, or turtles to gross out his sisters. Juana couldn’t afford to buy him a pet, so he would go find one. She couldn’t afford expensive toys, so he built a box castle and threw funny faces out of its windows to make his tired mother laugh.

Nor could she afford for him to play organized team sports, like the one he loved: football. He would go watch games, but it made him uncomfortable seeing fathers pull for their sons on Friday nights. When people asked about his father, Carlos told them the old man was at work.

As he grew older, he dreamed of buying a car to help Juana get around. She could never stay home long because she worked at the La Quinta Inn during the day and cleaned offices in the evenings. Her son needed attention.

In middle school, Carlos was approached by a group of older guys who were originally from California and had started a gang called the Brownside Locos. They were feared, respected, and loved by all the girls.

Carlos joined the gang. And for 30 seconds he took the beating of his life. They kicked and punched him all over—a universal tradition called getting “jumped” or “dropped in.” When it was over, the original gangsters—OGs—hugged him like a brother and promised to watch his back like a father.

The OGs expected Pee Wees like Carlos

"Stay close, stay close man," Joker kept barking at his driver. "Don't lose them."

The light turned green. The night of May 23 had become the Sunday morning of May 24. The cars passed Peachtree Corners Circle. No others were around.

"Get beside him now, now!" Joker told the driver.

The Impala pulled into the left lane alongside the Civic. Boxer, who was in the back seat, had his 9 mm locked and loaded, a khaki bandana covering his face. Just then Joker and Boxer slid out of the passenger side window, balancing themselves on the roof of the car.

Before emptying his clip, Joker looked directly at Ricardo Meza and yelled, "Brownside, motherfucker!"

In the back seat of the Civic, Joseph and Frog had been scheming about how to sneak out on the town after Ricardo and Brenda dropped them off. Then, chaos: Flashes of fire, a blown tire, Brenda leaning forward to help Ricardo duck. Loud, loud. Brenda pushing the steering wheel, steering the

car toward a median and saying, "Is everyone all right? Is anyone hit?"

"Sí," Ricardo groaned. Brenda didn't hear him for the noise. She watched him lean back in his seat. Then blood poured from his nose and mouth. Brenda screamed.

Ahead, Boxer continued to fire at the Civic. "You know you probably killed that guy, man!" the Impala's driver told him and Joker.

A short silence, then an eruption of laughter.

*I'm looking for you, I'm gonna get you back,
When I catch you on the streets sleepin'
And that ass is mine*

"We got 'em, we got 'em, we got one," Joker said, embracing the driver as the Impala sped away.

Brenda jumped out of the Civic in a panic. She finally flagged someone down, got a ride [CONTINUED ON PAGE 96]

to "put in work." Spraying graffiti to get the Brownside name out on the street. Selling drugs. Stealing car audio and construction equipment. Messing up rival gang members who encroached on Brownside's ever-expanding turf. The more work Carlos put in, the higher he would rise in the gang's leadership.

Carlos went to work.

To continue its war in Norcross, Brownside had to sell drugs to create cash flow. That got people out on bond, bought guns, and kept everyone intoxicated. An OG named Boxer would receive bricks of pot straight off the UPS truck. He would then distribute the bricks in small amounts for everyone to sell. One of the leading drug dealers in Brownside was Smokey—once known as Carlos Reyes. Rumor had it Juana's little boy routinely sold 50 pounds of marijuana and 4 to 5 kilos of cocaine per week.

CARLOS' NAME WAS ON THE FBI FAX that came into the Gwinnett County police offices in September 2002. He had been betrayed by someone he considered a friend, someone the FBI considered a confidential informant. The informant provided this account: Carlos came over to her apartment one day holding a news clipping. For a brown-skinned man, he sure looked pale. That's because Karlin Antunez (a member of a rival gang) had died, and Carlos learned about it through the paper. He then told

her this story. He had been fighting with his girlfriend and was blowing off steam driving in a friend's Maxima. Antunez was flashing red Northside colors. There was a sunroof in the Maxima. Carlos stood up through the sunroof and fired every round in his clip. It was a stupid thing to do.

**HE LOVED NINTENDO. HE
LOVED SPORTS. HE LOVED
SPLASHING AROUND IN THE
CREEK BELOW THEIR HOME,
BRINGING HOME TADPOLES,
CRAWFISH, OR TURTLES TO
GROSS OUT HIS SISTERS.
JUANA COULDN'T AFFORD
TO BUY HIM A PET, SO HE
WOULD GO FIND ONE.**

The informant also provided a picture of Carlos holding the murder weapon. So now on the January morning this year, Carlos was in court, reading his statement to a judge. Midway through reading his note, Carlos started to cry.

"I just kept getting deeper. Things started getting out of control. We would

go at them and they would go at us. We hurt them, they hurt us."

Assistant U.S. Attorney Kim Dammers had already described the killing of Antunez. But she had also called Carlos "articulate, intelligent, and cooperative" and recommended a lighter sentence of 210 months instead of the 240-month maximum.

"When my son was born I wanted to change for my son," Carlos continued to read in good English. "But I was taken from him because of my past actions. I fear that he will grow up like me, maybe not in a gang, but with the emptiness of not having a father."

Judge Beverly Martin paused. She's known for her compassion. "Your mother worked so hard for you," she said. "You were 20 when this happened. I understand that you're not that same person today."

She referenced the temptations he will face in jail to reestablish his gang affiliation and stay alive. Then she sentenced him to more than 17 years in prison without parole, upon which he will be deported because he's an illegal.

That one word—deported—seemed to knock the wind out of Juana as her son was led away. The marshal finally had to ask her to clear the courtroom. Juana made it through the double doors to the waiting area. There she collapsed on a bench and buried her head in her hands.

—W.P. McMICHAEL

THE BIG PAYBACK

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 81

to the nearby Quiktrip, and found a police officer, who took her back to the crime scene. There, a man was talking frantically to a 911 operator and trying to resuscitate Ricardo Meza. Blood had caked on Ricardo's face and neck like a mask. Only one of about a dozen rounds had hit him, but it entered under his left armpit and tore straight across his chest and lungs, exiting near his right shoulder.

The bullet was nowhere to be found. And Ricardo Meza was dead.

The Impala left the scene so fast a cop on I-85 flashed blue lights at it just minutes after the shooting. The Impala's driver slowed down and headed to Selena's, near the Chamblee-Tucker exit, where a parade of aligned gangsters cruised the entrance, looking cool, and where Joker had sprayed bullets several weeks earlier. When a bouncer saw that Joker was back—hanging out the window, flashing his Springfield—he ran

inside and called the cops. The Impala fled toward I-85 South.

The police immediately set up roadblocks, but the Impala's driver saw a thicket of blue flashing lights in the distance, turned off the interstate at the last minute, and vanished into the night. A convoy of cars full of young men who'd been following the Impala from Selena's were stopped, and the drivers and passengers questioned by the police.

Sunday, May 24, 1998

AT 3:26 A.M., INVESTIGATORS ARRIVED at the Motel 6. Brenda's mother and younger sister, who had heard that "something happened" and went looking for Brenda, returned a few minutes later. Together they began telling Detective J.W. Mashburn about the Brownside people who lived in their apartment complex—how they drove a white Impala and had been threatening Brenda and Ricardo with gang signs. They told the detective about the bottle that had been thrown at Ricardo's Civic.

Then Ricardo's brother, Gonstalo, arrived, looking for his brother, who should have been home by now. An officer took Gonstalo into one of the motel rooms and told him the news, then

**RICARDO AND BRENDA
MET AT THE CAR WASH OFF
BUFORD HIGHWAY. HE WAS
PRIMPING THE CIVIC, AND
BRENDA'S FAMILY WAS
WASHING HER AUNT'S CAR.
BRENDA COULDN'T TAKE
HER EYES OFF RICARDO—
OR HIS RIDE.**

gave him a card and told him where his brother's body would be available for identification and pickup. Later that night, Gonstalo called Mexico and told his mother that her son was dead.



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Other detectives combed the jails, looking for answers. Brenda had given cops the name Powder, the gang nickname of a white girl who had joined SUR-13, the gang to which Joker and Boxer thought Meza belonged based on his blue bandana. Powder established that Ricardo was not a member of SUR-13. Also, she said she thought she knew who owned the Impala, and she tried to help the cops isolate who might be responsible for Ricardo's death.

Though scared, Brenda dropped the name "Joker" to a detective on the scene. After that, she and her family left the Motel 6 and went underground. The cops were able to communicate with Brenda through a friend in Stone Mountain even after Brenda moved on to Texas. Again Brenda relayed the name Joker. And the friend in Stone Mountain, who'd received a threatening phone call from Brownside, reported that she believed she heard Joker's voice in the background.

Gwinnett County issued a warrant for the arrest of Joker—real name Oscar

Flores Lopez—but when cops arrived at his apartment, he had vanished. They located the Impala, but the driver had cleaned it the day after the shooting, at a car wash. He threw out the shell casings and wiped the glass clean of fingerprints.

June 3, 1998

NINE DAYS AFTER RICARDO MEZA'S murder, the phone rang at the Gwinnett County police station. A detective took the collect call. A young Hispanic female cut right to it: She knew where to find Joker. The woman refused to identify herself. She said she wanted out of Brownside and figured the best way would be to have the leaders arrested—then the gang would disintegrate. The detective listened.

The caller said Joker and his cousin Boxer—real name Rubin Flores Hernandez—boarded a Greyhound bus in Atlanta the Tuesday after Meza's murder and arrived in Huron, California, on Thursday at 2 or 3 in the morning. Then she provided the telephone number and address at which the two cousins were staying.

The detective quickly approved extradition through the Gwinnett County sheriff's office. The next day, a sergeant in California called with good news. He had Boxer and Joker in custody. Neither would talk, and they had to let Boxer go.

Joker was on his way back to Georgia, though. The Gwinnett detective asked to be contacted before a defense attorney could be appointed so that he could seek a confession. But somebody didn't get the memo. By the time the detective heard Joker was back, Joker had an attorney.

That left Gwinnett with no evidence, no indictment. So the case went cold.

October 2000

BROWNSIDE LOCOS OPERATED LIKE ANY other gang—of any ethnicity—in America. It was made up of troubled teenagers. It existed to preserve and flaunt its heritage, to expand its turf in a given neighborhood, to remain in a constant, escalating state of war, and to prove that its members can and will take lives. Regular Brownside meetings took place

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at the will of the leaders. Nothing was formal. Things happened when they happened. Members took initiative, proving themselves and rising in power by selling drugs and confronting rival gangs, by taking more turf and "putting bodies" on their pistols. Willingness to commit

IT'S A TERRIBLY UNDER-REPORTED PARADOX: COPS NEED ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS TO SOLVE CRIMES—IN THE HISPANIC COMMUNITY AND BEYOND.

murder often separates a weak gang from a strong one. Brownside was not weak.

Nor was it immune. Brownside members were constantly being shot at, assaulted, and pursued by other gangs. They lived in fear. They expressed solidarity by inking the BSL tattoo on their forearms, by wearing khaki bandanas

and clothing, by spraying graffiti.

Brownside considered itself autonomous but also part of a loose confederation of five Hispanic gangs known collectively as La Gran Familia. The "family" would occasionally have formal meetings at locations such as Lake Lanier to discuss problems within its branches, like who can wear what color bandana, what gangs should be targeted, who controls which streets. Meetings were usually called when gangs within the family had a confrontation or when a member was killed in action.

Mouse (Louis Peña), a member of an aligned gang, was murdered in October 2000. Brownside mourned and attended the funeral. Afterward, the family celebrated the life of the deceased by "showing some love." They sprayed graffiti, took group pictures, and prayed "A Gangster Prayer." It begins:

*Now I lay me down to sleep
Protect me God from those who creep
With evil plots and wicked schemes*

*To snatch me from my restful dreams
I know there's bad things I have done
That's why I'm sleeping with my gun*

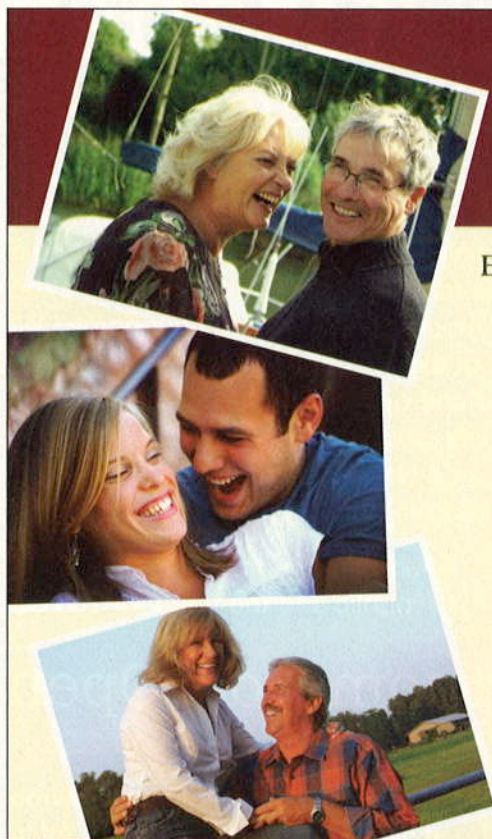
Then Brownside talked retaliation.

A few weeks later, before Thanksgiving 2000, the family allegedly executed two rival gang members—a 24-year-old man and a 17-year-old girl—outside Park Towne Apartments in DeKalb County. Neither had had a hand in Mouse's murder.

From 1998 to 2002, Brownside expanded its power in Gwinnett County. It took over Norcross. Murders and assaults started spilling over into DeKalb and Cobb. In October 2002, a double homicide occurred in a running gun battle down Sugarloaf Parkway on a Sunday afternoon. It was the last murder attributed to the Brownside Locos.

September 5, 2002

A MONTH BEFORE THAT GUN BATTLE on Sugarloaf Parkway and four years after Ricardo Meza's murder, a fax rolled into



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the clerk of court's office in Lawrenceville requesting certified copies of files for 28 suspected gang members. The request came from the FBI's Gang Task Force. The U.S. government had indicted 15 members of Brownside on racketeering laws once used against the mafia. Those laws provide advantages local authorities do not have: People can be charged with guilt by association and held for years pending trial. So people snitch, cut deals, and generally betray the gang for which they were once willing to die.

Oscar Lopez's name and alias, Joker, were not on the fax, but the name Rubin Hernandez, aka Boxer, was. The feds couldn't prove Joker had stayed in the gang. Boxer was indicted in Meza's murder as well as another gang-related shooting. If convicted, the racketeering law would put him away for up to 20 years without parole.

But federal and state authorities would need to rely on much more than racketeering statutes and extradition laws to dismantle a gang like Brownside. They had to use an increasingly valuable weapon in

the law enforcement arsenal: illegal aliens.

It's a terribly underreported paradox: Cops need illegal immigrants to solve crimes—in the Hispanic community and beyond. The authorities depend on the very people they're supposed to apprehend to report crime, serve as informants, testify at trials, and trust the system. From his corner office overlooking Downtown Atlanta, U.S. Attorney David Nahmias, the highest-ranking federal law enforcement official in North Georgia, spreads the word this way: "If you are a victim of crime, you'll be treated like a victim of crime." Says Nahmias, "There are special visas that can keep illegal aliens from being deported if they cooperate." Cops don't threaten innocent people who help solve crimes—they protect them.


With illegal immigration a hot issue in Georgia politics, critics are quick to point to gang activity as an argument for cracking down on immigration. But is illegal immigration responsible for the "growing" gang presence in

the Atlanta area? "It's related to but not *caused* by it," says Kim Dammers, the U.S. attorney's gang coordinator. That conditional rings loud. Why would a tough federal prosecutor ever give federal lawbreakers the benefit of the doubt? Especially considering the mounting pressure to crack down on illegal immigrants? It's a question of priority. Without informants, trails can go cold. Cases can become harder to solve. Crime can escalate.

June 2004

DETECTIVE DAVID HENRY RECEIVED A tip regarding Ricardo Meza's murder. It came from an FBI agent working the Brownside case. The agent told Henry to drive to Hays State Prison and interview "Crazy," a former Brownside member who had been put away for child molestation.

Henry was the investigator who, six years earlier, had interviewed Brenda next to the bullet-riddled Civic that contained Ricardo Meza's corpse. Henry was among the group that later stopped



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the post-Selena's convoy of gang members. He had interviewed another confidential witness the following afternoon, a witness who claimed to have heard Joker bragging about the shooting hours after the crime.

At the prison, Henry learned that Crazy had been the Impala's driver. Crazy—real name Amado Osorio, also known as "Lil Crazy" and, to relatives only, as Junior—told Henry the whole story. He agreed to testify against Joker. The FBI then let Detective Henry interview Turtle, the fourth person in the car that night. Turtle—real name Jose Ivan Quiroz—also identified Joker (Lopez) and Boxer (Hernandez) as the shooters. With that information, Henry secured a warrant for Joker's arrest.

Oscar Lopez, the 16-year-old triggerman, had become a 23-year-old father with no gang affiliation, and he lived with his girlfriend in a Post Apartments

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complex in Gwinnett County. He still had "Joker" tattooed on his neck and "BSL" on the inside of his left forearm.

He answered Henry's knock.

After booking Joker, Detective Henry returned to the apartment with a search warrant. He knew that former gangsters suffer from chronic nostalgia. They keep photographs and writings that can be used as evidence in trials. In the back of a closet in the kids' bedroom, police found what they were looking for: A box containing a stash of porn magazines under which was hidden a picture of Joker in a tank top, holding an AK-47 in one hand, a pump-action

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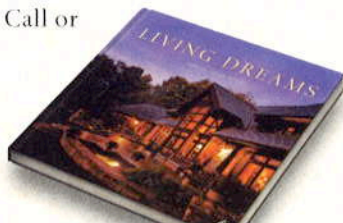


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shotgun in the other, and a smaller piece tucked in his waistband. That smaller piece, a Springfield 1911, was the murder weapon.

The Thursday before the trial's scheduled Monday start, Joker pleaded guilty to killing Ricardo Meza. He apologized to Meza's brother Gonstalo and wept.

January 4, 2007

THAT LEFT BOXER, JOKER'S COUSIN, to face trial.

Brenda came to the courtroom. She had come to remember and redeem Ricardo Meza, the man she had loved for three months then spent eight years mourning.

And now, today, in the 23rd-floor courtroom of U.S. District Judge Beverly Martin, Brenda would address the court at Boxer's sentencing. She would tell them about that night, and about the man she had loved. A burly FBI agent kept looking back at her and smiling reassuringly. She wanted to clear any suspicion about Ricardo's blue bandana, the two pagers in his pocket, the spider-web tattoo. Dammers, of the U.S. attorney's office, introduced her to the court.

Brenda walked up to the microphone.

"All he did was work," she said, then started to cry.

Boxer asked for permission to respond. He had recently carved the Brownside tattoo off his right arm with a razor blade, a crime punishable by death in the Brownside code. Years of pretrial detention had changed his mind about gang life.

Turning his back to the judge, Boxer addressed Brenda. He switched from good English to perfect Spanish. He spoke in a formal tone, as people do when greeting mourners at a funeral home. She looked him straight in the eye.

"I thank God every day that I am still able to ask for forgiveness for what I was involved in," he said.

As he spoke, two 8-year-old American citizens rubbed their heads against Brenda's arm. She stroked them calmly but never took her eyes off Boxer. The twins giggled and squirmed in the bench as the man who helped kill their 19-year-old father apologized for what he had done. They were the secret Brenda shared with Ricardo Meza the night he died. ❦